



Providence may reveal some of the beauties of creation to the ears of those who listen with their ears and their hearts.<sup>2</sup>

*Ingrid  
Monson*

Lateef's word autophysiopsychic crystalizes a deep aesthetic, psychological, and ethical philosophy that lay at the center of his life as a musician, composer, Muslim, writer, visual artist, and professor. In this essay, I first explore Lateef's musical and psychological concept of

grammars." The heart, as Lateef notes, is "the seat of the intellect."<sup>6</sup>

When "the sound of the music seems to tell us what kind of person is playing" the autophysiopsychic musician has achieved a dramatic voice. The listener is drawn closer to the personality of the musician, who seems to project a character responsible for the sound. Throughout this essay, Lateef takes Lester Young as an example of what he means by his autophysiopsychic ideal. "When listening to his music," he noted, "your ear will tell you that his character was warm and sensitive."<sup>7</sup>

For Lateef, the development of one's own voice was an achieved (rather than natural) quality that linked the exploration of musical craft to the development of personal character. He explained Lester Young's musical voice as follows:

He could treat notes so as to indicate assurance, by rapidly dropping the pitch, or indicate incompleteness by leveling the pitch in a manner which would suggest continuation, or when he thought it appropriate he would avoid traditional tones, by applying innovative fingerings, whereby he produced a new genre of sound textures. In conjunction with the sound textures that he introduced let me say that: as a tone language uses changes in pitch to indicate differences in the meanings of words—Lester used changes of texture, pitch and nuance, tempered by his immaterial self, to indicate differences in feelings or to put the audience into a certain frame of mind. . . . He never sounded as though he was confronted with an ambivalence in deciding what was central to his message—always convincing, authentic, and the logos, the proof, or apparent proof of his artistry was always there, provided by the sound of his music itself, nurtured by the gentle soul that he was.<sup>8</sup>

Lester Young served as a model for Yusef Lateef's own tenor playing, as can

be heard in "Yusef's Mood" from 1957.<sup>9</sup> As we will see, Lateef's own development of his personal voice can be charted through his exploration of the flute, the oboe, and non-Western instruments of many kinds.

In joining the Ahmadiyya Movement in 1948, Lateef entered an Islamic community that had attracted many other musicians of the bebop era, including Art Blakey, Ahmad Jamal, Dakota Staton, Sahib Shihab, and Idrees Sulieman, among others. The Ahmadis practice an inclusive multiracial form of Islam that stresses finding peace by following the path of God (Allah) and Islamic education.<sup>10</sup> In the 1920s, members of the Ahmadiyya Movement published the first English translation of the Qur'an available in the United States. Although their first proselytizer, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, intended to proselytize among all U.S. ethnic groups, his own problems as a South Asian in Jim Crow America led him to concentrate on African Americans. The Ahmadis in their early years were closely allied with Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, but their insistence that whites as well as African Americans were welcome in their community put them at odds with other Islamic groups supporting black nationalism. The Ahmadis, because they believe their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to be the Mahdi sent to reform Islam to its true meaning, are considered to be heretics and non-Muslims by many mainstream Muslim sects, despite their full observance of the pillars of Islam and practices of Islamic education.<sup>11</sup>

In Islam, Yusef Lateef found a path of intensive study, as well as ethical and spiritual development that guided his life. Through the Ahmadiyya movement he studied the Qur'an, the Arabic language, as well as the deeds and sayings of the

Prophet Muhammad. A distinguishing feature of Islam to Lateef was its commitment to education, something that he emphasized in his 1975 doctoral dissertation.

*Ingrid  
Monson*

In the light of commandments of the Quran and the traditions, the Muslims, at all

Yusef Lateef began achieving his own distinctive voice in autophysio-psyhic music in 1950s Detroit. In many ways, he pioneered a non-Western sensibility to improvisational exploration, characterized by the use of world instruments that would be taken up more broadly in the 1960s by partisans of the avant-garde. Although Lateef, who had been known as Bill Evans before his conversion to Islam, had met considerable success as a tenor saxophonist in Chicago and New York in the late 1940s, where he had worked with Eugene Wright and Dizzy Gillespie, his wife Sadie's ill health made him return to Detroit in 1951. Detroit's thriving jazz scene included musicians like Milt Jackson, Curtis Fuller, Barry Harris, Kenny Burrell, Elvin Jones, and Betty Carter. Although Lateef had a strong and confident tenor sax sound, Kenny Burrell encouraged him to add the flute and to study music theory and composition at places like the Larry Teal School of Music and Wayne State University. At the former, Lateef encountered the Schillinger system, a highly abstract and mathematical approach to thinking through rhythm, periodicity, and permutation. At the latter, he studied classical music, including Arnold Schoenberg and his serial methods of composition. In addition to flute, Lateef began studying oboe and exploring a variety of non-Western instruments.<sup>17</sup>

Detroit in the 1950s was home to a large Arab population. Lateef not only met co-religionists but discovered instruments from the Arab world through friends and at a Syrian spice store in the Eastern Market section of Detroit. These instruments included the argol, a double reed instrument, and the rebab, a string instrument.<sup>18</sup> Ayesha Lateef explained his interest in world instruments:

I think a lot of it had to do with being an Ahmadi. Meeting Ahmadis from around

the world, particularly India or Asia and then later Africa. And then also you know, the recitation of the Qur'an you know, which in Arabic has a melody to it. I kind of feel like eventually it would have happened anyway whether he was a Muslim or not, but being Muslim fed it.<sup>19</sup>

In 1957 he lived in the Ahmadiyya mosque in Detroit where he served as its imam and developed a curriculum for Islamic instruction for children and adults.<sup>20</sup> That same year he recorded *Metaphor*, an album featuring for the first time these new instruments. "Metaphor" opens with a Middle Eastern sounding argol solo, accompanied by the rebab, which is followed by a more orthodox instrumentation featuring Lateef on flute and Curtis Fuller on trombone. The rhythm section included Hugh Lawson on piano, Ernie Farrow on bass and rebab, Louis Hayes on drums, and Doug Watkins on percussion.

Lateef sought to break the mold in his ensemble sound through the instruments of other cultures. He began doing research at the public library on the instruments of Japan, China, Africa, and India. He also began making his own flutes, such as the pneumatic bamboo flute. Lateef through his interest in organology and cultural variety was becoming his own self-taught ethnomusicologist.

In following the development of Lateef's particular voice, it is clear that he was particularly drawn to the timbral variety made possible through playing multiple instruments. Although some of his compositions sounded non-Western, Lateef's musical language was deeply rooted in the blues, jazz, and bebop, whose expressive sensibility he had developed on the tenor saxophone, which he also continued to play. On the flute and oboe, Lateef seemed to be able to inflect his melodies in new directions, as can be heard on

his extraordinary performance of “Oboe Blues” in 1959.<sup>21</sup>

Lateef moved back to New York in 1960, where he began working with Lonnie Hillyer, Charles Mingus, Babatunde Olatunji, and Cannonball Adderley, and became a first call for recording sessions. Shortly thereafter he was able to buy a home in Teaneck, New Jersey, where he moved with his family. He toured internationally with Adderley, including Europe and Japan. Lateef played swinging straight-ahead tenor in the group, but Adderley also featured him on flute, oboe, and even bamboo flute. Although he clearly could have continued a mainstream jazz career in the top groups of the day, Lateef’s quest for his personal voice led him deeper into his world music explorations.

On the album *World* from 1961, Lateef added the Chinese globular flute, an instrument resembling an ocarina. After reading about this ancient instrument (also known as the *suona*) he searched for one in New York’s Chinatown. “The Plum Blossom” opens with an extended solo on the globular flute made up of four notes (A3, C#4, D4, E4) and accompanied by the rebab. His gradual development of a three-note riff-like theme, varied through embellishment and subtle rhythmic variation, showcases the appealing low regir

*Yusef Lateef's  
Autophysio-  
psychic Quest* deeply interested in symmetry, science,  
and religion and had similarly gentle per-  
sonalities. In 1961, Coltrane gave Lateef a  
birthday present of a mandala-like dia-

Manhattan School of Music where, by 1969, he had received his bachelor's degree in flute performance and a master's degree in music education. For Lateef, Islamic education and Western education were twin paths that he undertook simultaneously. He enjoyed studying not only the flute under former New York Philharmonic flutist John Wummer, but also taking courses in literature and art history. By 1971, Lateef was teaching music theory at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), while also enrolled in courses at the New School in philosophy and symbolic logic. Among his students were Albert Heath and Kenny Barron.

While teaching at BMCC, he began a doctoral program in education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst under the mentorship of music theorist and pianist Roland Wiggins. His dissertation "An Overview of Western and Islamic Education" explains to an English speaking audience the principles of Qur'anic study and scholarship in dialogue and comparison with Western writers on education—including Thomas Jefferson, Karl Jaspers, Immanuel Kant, Bertrand Russell, Jean Piaget, and John Dewey—finding points where Islamic and Western views converge and diverge. Just before he received his Ed.D., and one day before he became eligible for tenure, Lateef learned that BMCC had terminated him—an action that smacks of an administrative manipulation all too common in educational institutions at the time. In the 1970s, jazz programs were not valued, their instructors usually served in the lower ranks of the administrative hierarchy, and African Americans were particularly vulnerable to being dropped. Lateef mused in his autobiography: "Despite being in possession of three post-graduate degrees, I was without a teaching position."<sup>29</sup>

So he went on the road. Between 1975 and 1980, he took his band and family

around the world: England, Denmark, Norway, Pakistan, India, Ghana, Egypt, and Tunisia. During these years he added writing short stories to his long list of interests and began working on the scales and exercises that would become his famous "Scales and Exercises," published in 1981. He spent the next four years as a senior research fellow at the Center for Nigeria Cultural Studies at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, one of the original Hausa city-states and home to Nigeria's largest university. The Hausa are among the most prominent West African Muslim groups. He researched the Sarewa flute, played by Fulani herdsmen; taught research methodology to cultural officers at the Center for Nigeria Cultural Studies; and studied African music and drama. The fruit of this research was a book he coauthored with Ziky Kofoworola (a Nigerian dramatist) called *Musical Instruments of the Hausa*, published in 1987. The book is a serious piece of ethnomusicological research including interviews with Hausa herdsman, transcriptions, and organological diagrams of Hausa instruments. Lateef and Kofoworola had been commissioned by Nigeria's Minister of Culture to produce the book, and I think that the Society for Ethnomusicology should formally recognize Yusef Lateef's contribution to our field.<sup>30</sup>

Lateef's *Hybrid Suite*, an album recorded in Lagos in 1983 with Hausa, Yoruba, and Tiv drummers, presents what he calls a hybrid suite of dance pieces accompanied by traditional drummers, which include reference not only to African life, but Jamaica (on "Mu Omi") and Indian raga with drone (on "Lalit").<sup>31</sup> "Curved Space-time" features Lateef performing a call and response with himself on tenor and flute accompanied by traditional drums, including a talking drum. Quoting physicist Fritjof Capra on the elasticity of time



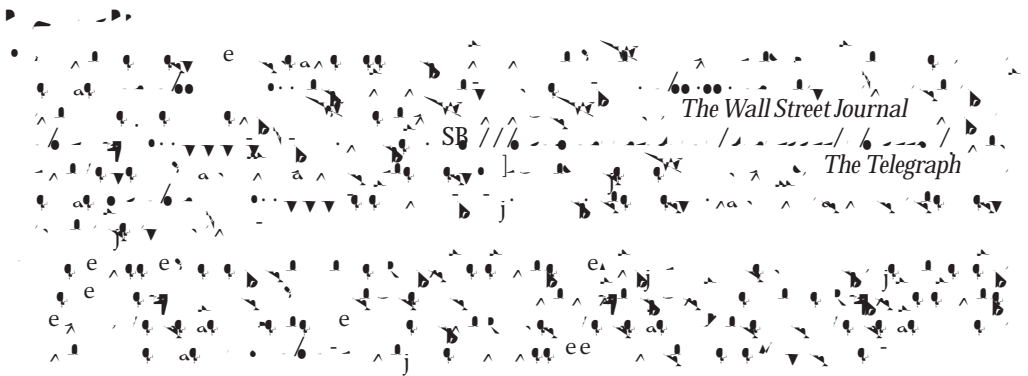
in Einstein's curved universe in the liner notes, Lateef thematizes a familiar ascending arpeggiated passage from John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" solo and responds on the flute to his tenor. The result is a kind of African "Giant Steps" accompanied by a warm, low-toned, resonant groove.

When he returned to Western Massachusetts in 1985, Lateef focused on composing, which led to the recording of *Yusef Lateef* in 1987, an album on which he played all instruments. Producer Nesuhi Ertegun helped arrange an Atlantic contract for the record and it won a Grammy in the New Age category in 1988. Finally, that same year, the University of Massachusetts hired Lateef as an associate professor of music. He was sixty-eight by then but went on to teach for fourteen years and was named a Five College Distinguished Professor of Music. While there, Lateef not only taught but started a record company called *Yusef Lateef Records*, composed, wrote novels, and completed hundreds of visual artworks.<sup>32</sup> His student Michael Didonna, a photographer and musician, created a short film in honor of Lateef called *Yusef Lateef: A Journey*, in which he can be heard talking about some of his educational philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Michael Dessen, a trombonist, composer, and former student of Lateef, wrote the introduction

to Yusef Lateef's *Yusef Lateef*, offering insight into the kind of effect he had on his students.

The range and breadth of Lateef's musical travels is astonishing, but what is most inspiring to me is something else, something more difficult to explain. He brings an overarching, singularly intense mindset to all of his projects, using all the possible tools at his disposal—scientific and intuitive, old and new, individual and collective, distant and close to home—to probe the nature of his feelings and thoughts. As a student, I marveled at the ease with which he flowed among different approaches to making music, different states of consciousness. While working within technically complex frameworks, he is always able to keep his ears and imagination open to new possibilities, to unexpected directions that the material might generate.<sup>34</sup>

Yusef Lateef's autopsiopsychic quest, fusing intellectual, physical, and spiritual development, reminds us of the long dedication of musicians to knowledge of multiple kinds.<sup>35</sup> Since the bebop era, jazz artists have viewed themselves as both an intelligentsia and a spiritual community devoted to musical exploration. Few artists have more thoroughly theorized the connection between the two than Yusef Lateef.



*Jazz Mood*

SMV FUL/A

*The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*

///

*A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States, Volume 2: The African American Islamic Renaissance, 1920–1975*

*The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*

*The Gentle Giant: The Autobiography of Yusef Lateef*

///

arghul, arghool-

*The Dreamer*

*The Gentle Giant-*

*Respository of Scales and Musical Patterns,*

*Jazz of Physics,*

*The*

Yusef Lateef's  
Autophysio-  
psychic Quest

A Love Supreme

The Qur'an

The African Beat

Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out  
to Jazz and Africa

The Gentle Giant-

Nigeria Magazine

In Nigeria

Yusef Lateef: Towards the Unknown

The Gentle Giant

Yusef Lateef Song Book,

Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation,